

NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

Congressman John Lewis

February 5, 2004

Thank you my friend, my brother, Senator Bill Nelson, for those kind words of introduction. I must say to each and every one of you that I am delighted and very pleased to be here this morning.

When I was a very young child growing up in rural Alabama during the 40's and 50's, my mother and father often told me, "Don't get in the way. Don't get in trouble."

Somehow, I discovered that people of faith must be prepared to get in the way, to get in trouble.

During the early 60's, I saw my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as an extension of my faith. So when I prayed. I was prepared to move my feet. I got in the way.

The Bible is right. "Faith without works is dead." And I saw the philosophy and the discipline of non-violence as love in action, in keeping with the teachings of the Great Teacher.

I can recall as a 19-year-old youth, before we participated in a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter in 1960, before we went on the Freedom Rides in 1961, before we attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, we would say a prayer.

And I will never forget when 600 of us slowly walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7th 1965. And when we came within hearing distance of the Alabama state troopers,

Major John Cloud said, “I give you three minutes to disperse and return to your church. This is an unlawful march, and it will not be allowed to continue.”

And one of us said, “Major, give us a moment to pray.”

And before we could begin to pray, Major Cloud said, “Troopers advance.”

I say to you this morning, if it had not been for the power of God, I would not be standing here today. So I know the power of faith. Because on that day I thought I was going to die. I thought I saw death.

Some of my friends ask me, “Why are you not bitter? Why don’t you hate the people that beat you, the people that jailed you? Why don’t you hate the people that almost killed you?”

But I say that hate is too heavy a burden to bear. And the teaching of the Great Teacher taught me the way of love, the way of peace. Taught me to love all of my brothers, to love all of my sisters, to love all members of the human family.

This morning I must tell you, I truly believe in the power of love, the power of the teachings of the Great Teacher, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I truly believe that only the power of the Almighty can lift a man from the lowest valley of hatred to the highest mountain of love.

And so I say to you this morning that as men and women of faith, we must believe in the power and the ability of God to work in our lives. Sometimes we have to get in the way. We have to allow ourselves to be used by God Almighty and the Holy Spirit.

If we really want peace, then we have to work for justice. We've got to help our brothers and sisters. It's not enough for us to come to pray and sing the great hymns. My brothers and sisters, we've got to get in the way.

It was our faith that kept us in the Civil Rights Movement. We knew there was a possibility that we might be beaten. We knew there was a possibility that we might be jailed. We knew there was a possibility that we may face death. But our faith helped us to carry on.

We believed in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, but we also believed in God.

Sometimes as people of faith, we do not know how things will work out. We do not know what the end is going to be, but we have faith. We believe that somehow, if we do what is right, if our hearts and souls are in tune with God Almighty then when we pray, and pray right, it is going to be all right.

I want to end this morning by telling you a little story about faith from my childhood. I remember it this morning like it was yesterday.

WALKING WITH THE WIND

My sisters and brothers, we all believe in a power greater than any of us.

So I say to you this morning, continue to pray and then move your feet. Walk with the spirit and let your faith be your guide. Peace be with you.